

IDENTITY OF HALLOWELL'S SNAKE GENERA MEGALOPS AND AEPIDEA

By LEONHARD STEJNEGER,

Head Curator of Biology, United States National Museum

It has long been realized that Hallowell's paper "Report upon the Reptilia of the North Pacific Exploring Expedition, under command of Capt. John Rogers, U. S. N.," edited after the author's death by E. D. Cope, and published in the Proceedings of the Academy of Sciences, Philadelphia, 1860, (pp. 480-510) contained many errors both as to identifications, descriptions, and localities. Many of these have been cleared up from time to time, but some of them have remained a mystery to the present time. One of the difficulties has been that the specimens were not originally properly recorded and labeled. The collections made by the expedition were taken to Philadelphia to be worked up, as there was nobody then in Washington who knew anything about exotic reptiles and amphibians, Hallowell being the only man in the United States who up to then had any experience in that line, except Girard whose connection with the Smithsonian Institution ceased about that time. Later the specimens were returned to the United States National Museum and added to a vast accumulation of uncatalogued herpetological material. In 1869 Prof. S. F. Baird, overwhelmed though he was by other work, began to catalogue part of these collections, giving them numbers in the record book and on the paper labels, but without taking time to identify the species, and often not even indicating whether the specimen was a snake, lizard, or frog, in most cases only noting the locality and name of collector in very general terms, trusting to the original labels when filling in the details later. By 1881 many of the old paper labels had deteriorated to such an extent as to be illegible and the decision was made to attach a tin tag with the stamped catalogue number to each specimen. Unfortunately, by this time Professor Baird had given up direct connection with the reptile collection, and the clerk to whom this work

to a great extent was delegated did not know anything about reptiles, their names, the literature involved, or the geography of the countries inhabited by them. He was also very often mistaken in his deciphering the old numbers, either carelessly written originally or blurred with age, so that this retagging of the collection resulted in an orgy of errors, some of which I have been able to discover, though the majority will probably remain incorrigible. At the conclusion of this retagging there remained hundreds of specimens, with or without data, which were recatalogued under new numbers, the old numbers being "obliterated."

Quite a few specimens of the collections brought home by the Rogers North Pacific Exploration Expedition suffered a similar fate. In my "Herpetology of Japan" (Bull. U. S. Nat. Mus., No. 58, 1907) I had occasion to call attention to some of them (for instance on pages 23, 96, 124, 148, 157, 175, 191, 196, 205, 239, 260, 328, 334, 340, 367, 412, 475), and others have been discovered since (thus the co-types of *Lygosaurus pellopleurus* Hallowell,¹ missing in 1907, have been found and reentered as Nos. 42110 and 42114).

One of the most perplexing mysteries of this kind has been the *Megalops maculatus* Hallowell,² alleged to have been collected in Tahiti by Mr. Adams. The description of the somewhat defective specimen was too insufficient to identify it with any known species, and as no land snake has been found in Tahiti by any other collector, the status of this species and the genus founded upon it has remained unsolved. Matters were made still worse when Cope, in 1895, in dissecting the specimen from Hongkong, Cat. No. 7339, U.S.N.M., which Hallowell had doubtfully referred to *Homalopsis buccatus*, erroneously assumed that he had before him Hallowell's *Megalops maculatus*. Cope redefined it as a separate genus and gave it the name *Anoplophallus maculatus*, because *Megalops* was preoccupied. As I have shown elsewhere,³ the specimen thus erroneously identified by two eminent herpetologists is that of a very common East Indian snake, *Lycodon subcinctus*. The true type not having turned up yet, I had to conclude, less than a year ago: "What Hallowell's *Megalops maculatus* from Tahiti really represents is still a mystery."³

In glancing over a shelf of old unidentified material a few days ago, my eye caught the word "Tahiti" on the faded paper label of a snake. It was at once confronted with Hallowell's original description of *Megalops maculatus*, with which it was found to agree in every detail. Here, then, was the type, Cat. No. 7367,

¹ Proceedings Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, 1860, p. 496.

² Idem, p. 488.

³ Proc. U. S. Nat. Mus., vol. 66, art. 25, 1925, pp. 90-91.

U.S.N.M. In the record book the original entry under that number has only the following:

Number: 7367.

Locality: Tahiti.

Collected by: Mr. Adams.

Number of specimens: 1.

An examination of the specimen, mutilated exactly as described by Hallowell, shows it to be a *Leptodeira* of the *annulata* group, the scale formula agreeing with the form described as *L. albofusca* in Boulenger's Catalogue of Snakes in the British Museum (vol. 3, 1896, p. 95), of which *Megalops maculatus* Hallowell consequently is a synonym. The range of the species extends from Mexico in the north to Paraguay in the south. The only place where the Rogers expedition could have obtained it is Nicaragua, where extensive collections were made.

On the same page (p. 488) as *Megalops maculatus* Hallowell described a new genus and species of snakes as *Aepidea robusta* with the habitat Gaspar Straits. This name has also remained more or less an enigma, since the type specimen has not been forthcoming until it was recognized in connection with the above investigation and shown to be a specimen (No. 7324) which has been on the shelves for many years under the name of *Gonyosoma oxycephalum* with the more than dubious locality "Japan" and collector "Perry Exped.," derived from the original record under that number. A careful comparison of this specimen with Hallowell's elaborate description of *Aepidea robusta*, with which it agrees in the minutest details, shows that Boulenger's conclusion as to its identity was correct and that the specimen is in reality Hallowell's type. An examination of the original record book shows, furthermore, that the correct number of this specimen should be Cat. No. 7508, U.S.N.M., with the "locality" Gaspar Straits and "collected by" Capt. Rodgers (sic!). The transposition of the numbers was undoubtedly made at the time of the tin-tagging described above, and the correct number has now been restored to the specimen. The "Gaspar Straits" is the strait between Banka and Billiton Islands in the Malay Archipelago, throughout which the species is common. The species has been reported since from Banka but not as yet from Billiton.